

Exploration of Expressionist Expression in Avant-Garde Multimedia Art in Contemporary Art Creation

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Abstract: Expressionism, as an aesthetic logic privileging the externalisation of inner emotional states over the mimetic representation of external reality, has undergone a significant transformation in contemporary art, migrating from its historical origins in early twentieth-century German painting to become a transhistorical principle animating avant-garde multimedia practices in installation art, video art, performance and digital immersion. The argument of this paper is that the fusion of expressionist logic and multimedia intermediality is one of the defining aesthetic formations of contemporary avant-garde art production, allowing artists to simultaneously engage many sensory registers in the interests of emotive intensity. The paper draws on Worringer's theory of the abstraction impulse, Bürger's theory of the avant-garde, Foster's return-of-the-real model, Higgins's intermedia concept, and Massumi's affect theory to examine three case studies—Bill Viola's transcendental video art, Anselm Kiefer's neo-expressionist multimedia installations, and teamLab's immersive digital environments—as paradigmatic examples of this aesthetic formation, elucidating the particular modalities by which multimedia intermediality amplifies and enriches expressionist expression in contemporary artistic practice.

Keywords: Avant-garde art; Multimedia; Expressionism; Intermediality; Affective intensity; Immersive installation; Bill Viola; Anselm Kiefer; TeamLab; Contemporary art.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Expressionism is commonly read as a historical art movement, mostly situated in Germany and Scandinavia in the early twentieth century, that was committed to the subjugation of exterior appearance to the demands of interior emotional reality. But the persistence of expressionist imperatives – the prioritisation of affective intensity, the distortion of representation in the service of feeling, the artist's subjectivity as the primary organising principle of the work – across the full range of twentieth and twenty-first century avant-garde practices indicates that expressionism is better understood as a transhistorical aesthetic logic than as a bounded historical movement. This reconfiguration is particularly evident in contemporary avant-garde multimedia art, where the convergence of material, temporal, digital and performative media within single works produces unprecedented possibilities for the mobilisation of sensory experience in the service of emotional expression.

The conditions of expressionist practice have changed, but not its essential logic. The proliferation of artistic media available to contemporary practitioners, from large-scale video projection and interactive digital installation to mixed media assemblage combining painting, sculpture, and photography, has transformed the conditions of expressionist practice. At the intersection of technology and affect, avant-garde multimedia artists have developed formal vocabularies that extend expressionism's emotional ambition into sensory and temporal dimensions unavailable to historical painters and printmakers, posing new theoretical questions about the relationship between medium, form, and affective content.

1.2. Research Questions and Contributions

This study considers three research questions: (RQ1) To what extent does the theoretical logic of expressionism, as

articulated from Worringer to Foster, correspond to the formal techniques of modern avant-garde multimedia art? (RQ2) In what ways does the intermedial union of various media in individual works expand or intensify the expressive potential of affective communication in expressionism? (RQ3) How do three representative contemporary artists, Bill Viola, Anselm Kiefer, and teamLab, demonstrate different constellations of expressionist multimedia practice? The study offers a conceptually integrated framework for linking expressionist aesthetic theory, avant-garde theory and intermediality studies to the understanding of modern multimedia practice. Close readings of three canonical cases demonstrate the analytical efficacy of the framework.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Expressionism as Aesthetic Logic

Wilhelm Worringer's 1908 dissertation *Abstraction and Empathy* provided the theoretical basis for understanding expressionism as a transhistorical aesthetic logic rather than a historical period style. Worringer proposed that two basic impulses—the urge to empathy, based on a confident relationship between humanity and the external world, and the urge to abstraction, resulting from existential anxiety and the desire for deliverance from the contingency of lived experience—function as opposing but persistent drives throughout the history of art. In Worringer's account the abstraction impulse – which appears as formal distortion, geometric rigidity and the suppression of naturalistic representation – is a response to inner unrest, and therefore structurally continuous with expressionism's core logic of prioritizing emotional interiority over mimetic fidelity. This theoretical shift detaches expressionism from its historical instantiations, positing it as a style of artistic response that recurs anytime the anxiety of existence outstrips the capacity of naturalistic representation to contain it.

Neo-expressionism, as it found expression in painting in

the 1970s and 1980s in the work of Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Julian Schnabel, was a demonstration of the continuing vitality of the logic of expression as a resistant aesthetic strategy, employing emotional intensity, material aggression and figural distortion against the dematerialised conceptualism and cool minimalism that had dominated avant-garde practice in the preceding two decades. Massumi's theory of affect as developed in *Parables for the Virtual* is the philosophical vocabulary with which to understand the operations of expressionist multimedia art at the level of the body: for Massumi, affect is a pre-personal intensity that escapes the coding of emotion, operating at the threshold between sensation and signification, and constituting the primary register through which art acts on the viewer.

2.2. Avant-Garde Theory in Contemporary Context

Bürger's theory of the avant-garde, which presented the canonical account of the historical avant-garde as a movement not just for aesthetic innovation but for the negation of art as an institution — an assault on the separation of art from the praxis of life that characterized the bourgeois art system. Bürger saw the historical avant-gardes — Dadaism, Surrealism, Constructivism — as genuine attacks on the institution of art which failed, becoming institutionalised as style, leading to the post-avant-garde situation where radical gestures are absorbed and neutralised by the very institutions they intended to destroy. In the *Return of the Real*, Foster complicates Bürger's narrative by arguing that the avant-garde returns to us from the future—repositioned and given new meaning by subsequent artistic developments—and that the contemporary return to materiality, the body and the real constitutes a continuation of avant-garde critical energy in post-conceptual conditions. Foster's paradigm is particularly relevant to multimedia expressionism: the re-emergence of affective intensity, materiality, and corporeal experience in contemporary installation and video art is precisely the kind of retroactive avant-garde repositioning that his model anticipates.

2.3. Intermediality and Multimedia Expression

In his 1966 essay, published in the *Something Else Newsletter*, Higgins introduced the concept of intermedia, a new paradigm of art-making in which works were located in the conceptual spaces between existing media — between painting and performance, between music and visual art — blurring disciplinary boundaries and resulting in hybrid forms with expressive capacities beyond any single medium. Higgins traced this tendency most clearly in Fluxus practice, but recognised it as a general tendency in avant-garde art toward the disintegration of medium-specificity as an organising element. Rajewsky's (2005) framework distinguishes three types of intermedial relation: media transposition, media combination (the material presence of several distinct media together) and intermedial reference, thus providing the analytical vocabulary for distinguishing the specific intermedial strategies through which multimedia artists achieve their expressive effects. In the avant-garde multimedia expressionism media combination is the main form: the simultaneous presence of video, sound, material objects, light and space produce a multi-sensory envelope that mobilizes affective intensity through the cumulative overloading of the viewer's perceptual apparatus.

3. Expressionist Dimensions in Avant-Garde Multimedia Art

3.1. Affective Intensity and Sensory Immersion

The most characteristic formal method of avant-garde multimedia expressionism is to employ scale, duration and multi-sensory simultaneity to create affective intensity through immersive sensory environments that obliterate the viewer's cognitive distance and create embodied emotional responses. Massumi's idea of affective intensity, the independent power of sensation that operates on the body prior to its organization into a named emotion, explains the process by which immersive installation art creates its expressionist effects. The work does not depict emotion but generates affect directly in the viewer's body via the manipulation of light, sound, scale, and duration. This strategy is a significant expansion of the affective ambitions of historical expressionism: whereas historical expressionists distorted pictorial representation to communicate inner states, contemporary multimedia expressionists create environments in which the viewer's own perceptual apparatus becomes the medium of expression.

3.2. Body, Trauma, and Material Expression

Foster's return-of-the-real theory locates the body as the site of return in post-conceptual avant-garde art — the locus where the real reasserts itself against the dematerialisation of conceptualism and the simulacral logics of postmodern culture. This return in multimedia expressionism is expressed as a focus on material presence: the material weight, texture and decay of materials; the bodily vulnerability of performance; the indexical traces of physical process in finished works whose expressive power comes from the cumulative affective charge of multiple sensory registers simultaneously engaged.

3.3. Technology as Expressive Medium

The introduction of digital and computational technologies to the avant-garde multimedia practice has opened up new levels of interactivity, temporal manipulation and environmental scale for the expressive potential of intermedial combination. As Hanhardt discusses Nam June Paik — widely recognized as the founding practitioner of video art — he places the emergence of video as an artistic medium within a larger expansion of avant-garde practice that embraced electronic and broadcast technologies as genuinely expressive resources, not just reproductive tools. Contemporary avant-garde artists have developed practices in which the specific qualities of digital media — the fluidity of time, the capacity for responsive interactivity, the potential for infinite immersive scale — are utilized as intrinsically expressive resources, rather than considering technology as a neutral tool for the articulation of pre-existing intentions. The critical discourse on space, surveillance, and digital installation documented by Levin and Frohne emphasizes how the architectural and environmental dimensions of multimedia art generate conditions of affective immersion that are qualitatively different from the viewer-object relation of traditional gallery formats. Paul's review of digital art further confirms that the spectrum of expressive tactics made possible by digital technology, from interactive installation to generative systems, forms a truly new chapter in the history of artistic expression. This development raises unanswered theoretical questions regarding the relation between technical

mediation and affective authenticity in current expressionist theory and calls for a broader theoretical framework that can account for collective, interactive, and algorithmically generative forms of expression.

4. Case Studies

4.1. Bill Viola: Video Art and Transcendental Expressionism

Bill Viola's video art is the most continuous and theoretically developed example of expressionist multimedia production in the modern period. Using large-scale video projection, spatial sound and the elemental symbolism of water, fire, earth and air, Viola constructs immersive temporal environments in which the manipulation of duration – through extreme slow motion and the extension of ordinary temporal experience – becomes the primary expressive medium for the articulation of spiritual states: birth, death, transformation and transcendence. Works such as *The Crossing* (1996), in which a solitary figure is consumed by fire and water simultaneously in a split-screen projection, and the *Martyrs* series (2014), which depicts figures subjected to elemental forces of earth, air, fire, and water, use the intermedial combination of video, sound, and spatial scale to produce states of contemplative intensity that Viola explicitly situates within the spiritual traditions of Christian mysticism, Sufism, and Zen Buddhism. This explicit engagement with transcendence is a practice of Viola's, which is close to the spiritualist dimension of historical expressionism, especially Kandinsky's argument in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* that the highest function of art is the expression of inner spiritual necessity through form and colour, and also extends it through the temporal and spatial possibilities of video installation.

4.2. Anselm Kiefer: Material Memory and Neo-Expressionist Multimedia

Kiefer's work embodies the neo-expressionist inclination to advance painting into three-dimensional multimedia collage through the use of weighty, symbolically loaded materials. Since the 1970s, Kiefer has worked with lead, ash, straw, shellac, clay and charred organic matter, creating a visual language where material itself carries the affective weight of historical trauma, especially the Holocaust and the burden of German cultural memory, without resort to conventional pictorial representation. Kiefer has said that lead is the only material heavy enough to carry the weight of human history. Its weight, toxicity, malleability, and association with death and transformation, make it the perfect expressionist medium for the articulation of historical guilt and the aspiration toward transformation. Storr's critical reading of Kiefer's universe places his practice within a distinct German tradition of addressing collective historical trauma through monumental aesthetic form, suggesting that the material weight of his works is inseparable from their ethical gravity as responses to the Holocaust. Kiefer's practice, in works like *Breaking of the Vessels* (1990), which employs an intermedial mix of painting, sculpture, photography and assemblage to conjure the Kabbalistic myth of cosmic fracture via lead books and broken glass, is thus situated at the intersection of Bürger's avant-garde negation and Foster's return of the material real.

4.3. TeamLab: Digital Immersion and Collective Affect

TeamLab's immersive digital environments, most fully realised in the teamLab Borderless installations in Tokyo, are a radically different configuration of multimedia expressionism that substitutes the individualist, trauma-centred and material focus of Viola and Kiefer with a collectivist, celebratory and digitally dematerialised aesthetic. TeamLab deals with large-scale interactive projections where the movement and presence of visitors dynamically alter the visual environment, creating what they call a "world of artworks without boundaries" in which single artworks flow and interact across space boundaries, responding to visitors in real time. Intermediality here is media combination extended to interactivity: digital image, spatial sound, body movement, and collective social presence are combined into a total sensory environment whose affective effects – wonder, dissolution of individual boundaries, collective euphoria – are a form of expressionism at the scale of community rather than individual subjectivity. Critically, teamLab's marketing of immersive experience questions if this success is the institutionalisation of the avant-garde techniques that Bürger saw as the inevitable fate of radical artistic gestures.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Expressionism as a Transhistorical Aesthetic Logic

The three case studies presented here show that expressionism as a mode of engagement with the priority of subjective intensity over mimetic depiction is a dynamic and generative aesthetic logic in contemporary multimedia art. Viola, Kiefer and teamLab are three different incarnations of this logic – transcendental, traumatic and collective – which share the structural commitment to activating numerous sensory registers concurrently in the fabrication of overpowering emotive experience. The theoretical framework linking Worringer's abstraction impulse, Massumi's emotion theory and Rajewsky's categories of intermediality offers a cohesive analytical vocabulary to theorize how these configurations operate in various combinations of media and ways of expression.

5.2. Critical Reflections: Commodification and Limits

The institutionalization of avant-garde multimedia expressionism within major museums, commercial galleries, and tourism economies, raises critical questions about the relationship between avant-garde aspiration and cultural commodification that Bürger's theoretical framework anticipates but does not resolve. Foster's model of the retroactive avant-garde provides a more generative framework. If the critical potential of expressionist multimedia art is not exhausted by its institutional absorption but re-emerges in future practices that reposition and radicalise it, then the current commercialisation of immersive digital art does not mark the end of avant-garde expressionism but a moment in its ongoing historical dialectic.

5.3. Implications and Future Research

Future research should build on the framework developed here by extending it to non-Western avant-garde multimedia practices, and in particular by investigating how artists

working outside of European and North American traditions – including practitioners in East Asian, African, and Latin American contexts – configure the relationship between affective intensity, multimedia intermediality, and culturally specific expressive traditions. Practice-based research approaches including artist perspectives and audience reception studies would supplement the theoretical study here, basing the affective claims of expressionist theory in empirical evidence of how these works interact on viewers.

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